

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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A Fax from Vilnius

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Saturday afternoon, January 12th, at the Polish border town of Kuznica. Virginijus (Virgis for short) Pikturna, one of the 141 deputies in the Lithuanian Parliament (and my fiance) and I were on our way back to Vilnius from Berlin, where we had been invited to give a series of lectures on the current political situation in Lithuania. We had arrived in Germany on Tuesday evening, January 8th, and turned on the television in our hotel room just in time to see the German evening news report show images of an angry mob storming the Lithuanian Parliament, being held back -- only momentarily -- by water hoses. The most immediate reason for the angry mob, according to the TV news commentators, were the draconian price rises introduced by Prime Minister Prunskiene's government the day before, where the cost of basic food items tripled, often quadrupled. But as the crowd in front of Parliament waved only Soviet flags and anti-independence posters, we concluded this was more a pro-Moscow rally using the price rises as just the latest pretext to protest the existence of the current Lithuanian government, and to once more call for direct presidential rule from Moscow to be introduced.

We decided right then to cut short our planned one week trip and to return to Lithuania as soon as our most immediate obligations were met. We left on Friday night, January 11, from Berlin-Lichtenberg on the Leningrad-bound train. Some eighteen hours later, we found ourselves at the Soviet border.

Shortly after 3 P.M., on Saturday, passengers were informed that the train would not stop in Vilnius -- scheduled time of arrival was 21.18 -- at all. I asked a Russian train official why. He answered in one word. "Vadna" he said simply. War.

Perhaps he exaggerated in describing the crisis which had erupted in Lithuania during the second week of January in this way. But only slightly. After that first frightening demonstration that we saw over German television, the following days were a succession of one destabilizing event after another. Parliament quickly revoked the price increases, and Prime Minister Prunskiene and her government resigned. Most ominous of all, the Soviet military authorities lost no time in taking advantage of the government crisis. They intensified their hunt for young men refusing to serve in the army, closed Vilnius airport and occupied the republic's central press house, where all major newspapers in Lithuania are printed.

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But on late Saturday afternoon at the border, the change in train routes still felt more like a momentary nuisance than the first signal of impending disaster. Disembarking at Grodno, Byelorussia, and bribing a taxi driver with 200 rubles (the average monthly salary for most Soviet workers, or about \$10.00 to \$20.00 on the black market rate, depending on your black market banker; I do not know official rate) to drive 190 kilometers north to Vilnius, there was little problem in getting to the Lithuanian capital. We quickly sped through the forests of Byelorussia and southern Lithuania, entering the city without encountering one tank, one convoy of Soviet soldiers.

Throughout Saturday evening, Lithuanian television conveyed hope rather than alarm. During a press conference, Parliament's president Vytautas Landsbergis expressed cautious optimism that, with Boris Yeltsin's outraged condemnation of army activities in Lithuania and the awaited arrival the following day of a delegation from Moscow to investigate the situation, there was reason to think a political solution could be found. The evening news program, Panorama, reported that with the first regularly scheduled flight from Alma Ata landing, it could be considered that the airport had at least partially reopened. Even some of the 35 trains, with 20,000 stranded passengers, at the central Vilnius train station -- due to a strike by the largely ethnic Russian, pro-Moscow train personnel -- would soon be moving. The worst, it seemed, was over.

But the night had more tragic things in store.

Sunday morning, January 13th. After Virgis' parents phoned at 3 A.M., to say that the central building of the Lithuanian radio and television station in Vilnius, as well as the Parliament, have been stormed by Soviet troops (the former proved to be true; the latter, false) in the name of a mysterious National Salvation Committee (for several days, there were no individual members listed in any of the proclamations issued by this Committee), Virgis and I turned on the television to the Lithuanian channel (it was dead) and our short-wave radio. After much dialing, we caught a faint radio signal -- we later learned it was being transmitted from Kaunas, the second largest city in Lithuania, some 100 kilometers west of Vilnius. A woman's voice came through the static:

"Dear people of Lithuania! Lithuanian radio is broadcasting! Lithuanian radio is broadcasting! We inform you that our regularly scheduled radio programs have been cut off by brutal military action. We are informing all of Lithuania's people, Europe, and the world's nations about this. Silence at the microphones and strange (foreign) voices (that might be heard) there does not mean that we have gone back on our goals. The large majority of our state's people are firmly prepared to go forward on the road we mapped out on March 11, 1990. We appeal to.

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everyone who can hear us that, although we can be broken by violence, our mouths gagged, we can never be forced to disavow freedom."

We hastily dressed and drove to Parliament. Set at the end of Vilnius' main boulevard, Gediminas Prospect, it was now a modern-day fortress under siege. Dozens of busses which had brought people from across Lithuania to Vilnius, ringed the three parliamentary buildings. Heavy trucks and cranes blocked back and side entrances. Hundreds of cars lined the nearby streets, sidewalks, parking lots, parked even on the middle strip of the central expressway that runs around the rim of the city center.

Thousands of people in Independence Square formed a human wall around Parliament. There were loudspeakers and bonfires. Layer upon layer of two meter high rusted iron grates were being set in place to seal off the building's front courtyard. Uniformed police stood inside the blocked off courtyard. They wore the same woolen greatcoats and thick square hats one sees throughout the Soviet Union, with the difference that the symbols, from the badge on the hats to the epaulets on the shoulders, were no longer the Soviet hammer and scytle but the Lithuanian vytis (a medieval knight, sword raised, mounted on a horse). But it was plain clothes men from the parliamentary security forces who checked identifications of those who wanted to get into the building. Soon the front door itself was blocked. We were among the last to enter through it.

What I saw inside looked like the last stand of a leadership desperately bracing itself for what could be its final hour. The airy front lobby, with its high ceiling, comfortable sectional sofas and armchairs had been transformed into a barricade. Sofas were overturned and piled on top of one another, pushed against the large front floor to ceiling windows. Canvas covered water hoses snaked across the marble floor, up the front, back and side staircases. Sandbags were shoved against some windows, boards against others. Olive and beige colored gas masks were being distributed from wooden crates on the second floor. The smell of petrol, brought in to make Molotov cocktails, wafted through the halls.

Except for the central chamber itself, the entire building remained unlit. Hundreds of young men, who had taken an oath to defend the Lithuanian Constitution and Parliament with their lives, if necessary, had been there since Thursday. Now they milled about in the halls and front lobby, often just blurred shadows in the dark. Many huddled in corners, stretched out against the walls, or draped themselves over the stairs, trying to catch a few minutes of sleep. As I made my way towards the central chamber, I almost tripped over some of them.

I entered the central chamber just before 4 A.M., as a

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foreign journalist, (I believe he was Danish; but he could have been Norwegian) at times his voice trembling, was reporting the worst news of all. The two and a half years of political turmoil in Lithuania, when violence had been avoided, ended less than two hours earlier. Blood had finally been spilt. Approximately 90 parliamentarians (who had spontaneously gathered there when the radio and television stations went dead at 2 A.M.) listened as the journalist gave his eyewitness account of what had happened. At 2 A.M. Soviet troops had stormed the television tower and the central radio and television station, both less than a few kilometers away. At first the soldiers had fired blanks, he said, which had such strong percussion effects that at the TV station, for example, they splintered the windows apartment houses across the street. But then tanks began running over some people, crushing them, he said, and soldiers fired their guns -- this time using real bullets -- on others.

A few minutes later, I saw New York Times correspondent Bill Keller and his wife, National Public Radio's correspondent, Ann Cooper. They had both been at the television station when the shooting occurred. Both were visibly shaken. Ann said that as the troops were moving in on the people standing there, a loudspeaker blared the following words, "All power is now in the hands of the National Salvation Committee! Don't believe the lies of your government! Children, go home!" And then the troops opened fire.*

Both Bill and Ann then went to a nearby hospital, where they saw the dead and some of the wounded being brought in. They described two corpses in particular. One was of a young boy, his body all contorted -- he had been run over by a tank -- lying in a pool of blood. Another was an older man shot through the head.

At 3:30 a.m., Sunday morning, there were seven known dead (the final official count would reach fourteen by Monday night; 10 of these under 30 years old, and one was a Soviet paratrooper himself, shot -- probably by mistake -- by his own forces) and scores wounded (over 164 reported by Monday night.) A black ribbon was draped across the tri-color flag in the front of the central chamber, and 4:49 A.M., Sunday morning, there was a moment of silence for the dead.

Two friends, both parliamentarians, greeted me when I first entered the central chamber. 33 year old Algirdas Kumza -- who belongs to the Free Democratic fraction together with Virgis -- and who normally reacts to events in an unruffled, slightly ironic way, was clearly bewildered. "We departed last night (after a regular parliamentary session had ended) thinking that everything was calm," he said. "A few buildings had been taken over. But there was the delegation (from Moscow) coming tomorrow, there was the declaration by the Russian Federation." Kumza added that he saw one doctor in the central chamber a short while before who was "literally shaking with emotion" when he learned

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that seven people had already been killed.

33-year old deputy Rimvydas Valatka, editor of the Sajudis newspaper, Atgimimas, and member of Parliament's central fraction, reported that the television journalist Bucelyte -- a young woman in her mid-20's who reports the late evening news -- "worked until the last minute." As the paratroopers were storming the station, her final on-air words, Valatka said, were "We are surrounded by tanks. We are surrounded by tanks." Valatka further explained that with cameras hidden earlier, the TV journalists had even filmed the paratroopers breaking down some doors in the building. Towards dawn, the head of Lithuanian television, Algirdas Kauspeda (a former rock singer, band leader and Sajudis activist) entered Parliament. He had remained in his office until the paratroopers broke into it. They soon released him.

When at about 5 A.M., I briefly left Parliament -- through a back window; the building was now barricaded from the inside as well as the outside -- to visit a nearby hospital, I was escorted there and back by a young security forces leader. One year ago, my escort had been a history student in the final year of his studies. Now the slender dark-haired man was a full-time staff of the security forces. In the few minutes we spoke, he told me that his family had all been deported to Siberia in the 1940's by the Soviets, and how he had grown up with the history of their sufferings. Pointing to a shadow who had unexpectedly crossed our path as we walked, he said, "That man lost his hand as a partisan in the forests, fighting the Soviets in the 1940's." And he added, quietly, but firmly, "Not one shot from our side was fired at the TV Station. But if they attack Parliament, we will fight back."

I did not doubt him. But Parliament was a fortress without weapons. I saw only about half a dozen of the hundreds of young men there carry hunting rifles. The rest had only truncheons, many of which were make-shift, solid steel spokes that had been pulled out of the concrete floor on the staircases, where now, wooden railings were lopsided for lack of support.

Yet I encountered the same determination -- to defend oneself, one's principles, one's honor, however futilely -- at the hospital a few blocks away from Parliament. When I arrived there shortly after 5 A.M., the dead had already been removed to a mortuary on the other side of town, and several of the wounded were scattered throughout various wards.

I spoke to one young man, 21-year old Arunas Steponaitis, as doctors in blood-flecked white coats had just finished examining him. Steponaitis, shot in the buttocks, now lay on his side. (I later saw him limp painfully down the hall where on his way to an operating room.) He was one of the Lithuanian civil defense security forces members and had been at the television station

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when the everything began. "At first, when we saw them shooting into the mass of people, we retreated to the third floor of the television building," he said. "Then we jumped out the windows, and began to run across the back field. That's when they began to shoot at us."

Outside in a hallway, I briefly spoke to another of the wounded, 38 year old Antanas Sakalauskas, a brown-haired, bearded computer specialist. Partially covered by blankets, and wearing a tortoise undershirt, he lay on stretcher parked in the far corner, waiting to be wheeled into an operating room. His legs had been run over by a tank. He was completely conscious and was able to give me this report.

"I had been standing since lunctime at the TV tower. There were about ten rows (of people) there. At first (when the army started storming the tower) there were gas clouds emitted from the cannons (of the tanks) and some scattered shots. About eight or twelve of the tanks then drove up the hill towards the tower and then circled it. People shouted "Geda (Shame)"...Then the tanks turned from the left. I began to run. They drove over my legs. There was a woman next to me. There were four of us (pinned under the tank). People began to shout to tell them to get off...People carried us in their arms to waiting cars."

Sakalauskas broke off at this point, as doctors and nurses standing by his stretcher began to change the bandages on his feet. His feet were very badly bruised and bloodstained. The internal damage must have been massive for, when a doctor slightly lifted one foot, Sakalauskas, who had been rather animated, was barely able to suppress a groan, and through clenched teeth, said to the doctors. "Do what you have to do." One of the nurses, Grazina Sustaviciene, broke down, and her voice shaking with anger, pointed to Sakalauskas and said to me, "It's very good that you are writing about what is going on in Lithuania.. Tell the world. It is absolutely necessary. We are working now day and night, and let the world know that we are only for a free Lithuania."

I also saw two young boys, both wounded, who couldn't have been much past 20 years old. The doctors told me that one was a second-year student at the university. One was already unconscious, under medication, and the other was in the final stages of the drugs-taking their effect. With his face turned to a wall, and his eyes still open, he no longer responded to voices in the room. The bandages of both boys were barely visible under the blankets where they lay curled up.

As dawn broke on Sunday morning, the deputies passed a law authorizing Foreign Minister Algirdas Saudargas -- then on a trip to Poland -- to form a government in exile, if and when the leadership in Vilnius could no longer function. That the deputies

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felt this could be imminent was obvious. Some polished their gas masks, others intermittently listened to short wave radios. One local radio broadcast -- from the National Salvation Committee -- announced that by order of the komandant of the city, Major General Vladimir Nikolaevitch Uskhopchik (until the day earlier, he had been komandant only of the armed forces stationed there) a curfew was to be in place from 22:00 to 6:00. It was forbidden to hold meetings, demonstrations or strikes or carry any weapons. It was further forbidden to possess a radio, typewriter, video, tape recorder, or duplicating equipment. Patrols would be stationed around the city, authorized to check people's identifications. Throughout Sunday, this message, called the "commandant's hour" was frequently repeated, in Russian and Lithuanian. Yet reports from around the city did not show that there was as yet any move to enforce it. And just before dawn broke on Sunday morning, one deputy announced that tanks had been spotted returning to one of their bases, the "Northern City".

With daybreak, the immediate threat to Parliament -- intensified by the night -- was at least temporarily suspended. But the parliamentarians were soon stunned by another piece of news, which once more threw the focus on the internal political confrontations that had plagued Lithuanian politics since March 11. At about 8:30 A.M., Vytautas Landsbergis announced that, together with his entire family, the new Prime Minister of three days, 40 year old academic Albertas Simenas (also a parliamentarian until his appointment), had disappeared under questionable circumstances. Unable to offer any more information, Landsbergis urged Parliament to elect an interim Prime Minister so that at such a critical moment, the government would not be leaderless. Landsbergis added that, if and when Simenas reappeared, "and would be able to function in his office" the interim Prime Minister would step down. The stunned parliamentarians quickly confirmed Landsbergis' proposed candidate, 33 year old economist Gediminas Vagnorius (a long-time opponent of Kazimiera Prunskiene's policies) shortly after 9:00 A.M.

The curious event and lack of any further information resulted in half a dozen various interpretations -- ranging from Simenas being abducted by the Soviet army to Simenas running from Lithuania -- to quickly buzz throughout the central chamber. Kazimiera Prunskiene, who entered the chamber shortly after 10:00, was quick to offer her own version. She maintained that it could well be a political ruse on Landsbergis' part to push through Gediminas Vagnorius for the post. She also faulted the Landsbergis leadership for the current crisis. "They brought us into this blind alley" she said, adding that turning the Parliament into a possible battleground was also a mistake. "We are hostages here," she said, pointing out that with all the petrol inside and the barricades entrances, all that was needed was one match to light a major fire.

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Prunskiene was not alone in her criticism. Former Deputy Prime Minister Algirdas Brazauskas, who, when asked who was responsible for Lithuania's current embattled position, waved his hand across the central chamber of Parliament. "Our tragic situation depends on us," he said, adding that he had lost all hope for Lithuania some two to three months ago, when the confrontation with Moscow "entered the economic sphere" and there was no guarantee for the republic's economic well-being for 1991.

Other deputies accused those who voiced such pessimism as proof that in Lithuania's most embattled hour, she was being betrayed from within. "Everything is connected to the fact that we tried to topple the post-Communist government (of Kazimiera Prunskiene)," explained the leader of the conservative Independence party, Virgilijus Cepaitis, who said that with the bitterness Prunskiene felt with her defeat, Lithuania's "greatest danger is strictly internal." Proof said Cepaitis, "was that we were able to appoint Vagnorius (Prime Minister) only in extraordinary circumstances. It couldn't have happened in normal times."

Vagnorius stayed Prime Minister, even when Simenas reappeared about six hours later. In a closed session, Simenas explained that the reason for his disappearance was fear for the safety of his family -- for some reason the personal bodyguards stationed to guard the family had disappeared. Simenas also told his fellow parliamentarians that he was surprised that another prime minister had been appointed in his place. But as one deputy later reported, Simenas' emotional state was so obvious "that the question of reinstating him and Vagnorius stepping down was not even raised."

By late Sunday afternoon, the awaited delegation from Moscow had arrived, and together with several Lithuanian government officials, had met with local military leaders. The army agreed to refrain from implementing military rule -- as put forth in the Commandant's hour -- or to attempt the takeover of any more buildings. Just after 9:00 P.M., a Parliamentary spokesman (it might even have been Landsbergis; I don't remember exactly, however) asked that most people, who had been standing in the intermittently raining or freezing weather outside for hours, to disperse. Only a skeleton force was to remain both inside and outside the building. An emergency network was set up to house those for the night who had come from other cities. By 9:30, the deputies themselves started to go home.

So the expected attack on Parliament had not taken place -- this weekend. The final mortal blow to Lithuanian independence had not yet been struck. As dawn broke on Monday morning, Lithuania prepared to mourn her dead. Her leadership were still hanging on -- by a thread. Who knows for how long.